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“The Content of Our Character”: Value Differences in the Narrative Comments of Navy Officer Fitness Reports

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ABSTRACT

As an extended analysis of Thomas, Edwards, Perry, & David's (1998) content analysis of Navy officer fitness reports, this investigation explored the relationship between the written comments and promotion recommendations. In the earlier study, Thomas et al. identified racial differences in the descriptors more often ascribed to black officers and those more often ascribed to white officers. Their data were used in the present analysis to determine if the differences reflected subtle (if unintended) racial bias. The findings revealed that certain of the character-related descriptors were more likely to be associated with an “early” promotion recommendation, whereas other descriptors were more likely to be associated with the “regular” or “no” promotion recommendations. Importantly, the descriptors associated with early promotion were more often ascribed to white officers, while the descriptors associated with the lesser promotion recommendations were more often ascribed to black officers. Implications for these findings are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, Thomas, Edwards, Perry, & David (1998) conducted a detailed content analysis of fitness report (i.e., performance evaluation) narratives for a sample of male Navy officers. Consistent with findings from earlier studies on gender differences (e.g., Thomas, Holmes, & Carroll, 1983), Thomas et al. found statistically significant racial differences in some of the descriptors ascribed to black officers and those ascribed to white officers.¹ White Navy officers, for instance, were more likely to be described as “Thorough,” whereas black officers were more likely to be described as “Dedicated.” Arguably, both descriptors appear to be favorable assessments. In discussing the pattern of results, Thomas et al. noted that although clear evidence of racial bias was not demonstrated, the findings did indicate the performance and potential of black officers were viewed *differently* (emphasis added) from that of white officers. Operating under the assumption that certain traits probably had little effect on selection boards (the process used to determine promotions), Thomas et al. asked several Navy officers with selection board experience to evaluate the lists of traits used to describe black officers and white officers.² These officers concluded that both lists were “equally positive” -- neither list appearing to be more favorable than the other.

While there may be general agreement on the overall favorability of the descriptors identified in the Thomas et al. study, differences may exist in the relative value of the descriptors for promotion assessments. It may be that certain descriptors are more closely associated with conceptions of leadership -- and, hence, promotability -- than other descriptors (cf. Atwater & Yammarino, 1993; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986). This distinction is important because perceived leadership potential is a key factor in promotion decisions (Drewry, 1993; Gonzales, 1997; Thomas, Perry, & David, 1994; Wallace, 1991). Since terms used to describe an individual's character may imply more than just the word's surface meaning (see Ruscher, 1998 for complete discussion), the racial differences discovered in Thomas et al.'s study raise the possibility that subtle bias may occur through the language of the written comments.

To investigate this possibility, an expanded analysis of Thomas et al.'s data was conducted. Of particular interest was the possible relationship between the descriptors and the promotion recommendation included in the fitness reports. Specifically, were officers more likely to be recommended for early promotion (vice regular promotion) if they were described as “thorough,” while less likely to be recommended if described as “dedicated”? If such a distinction exists, then it would follow that ascribing specific characteristics to certain racial groups may, in essence, create subtle bias -- even if unintended.

¹ This research uses the terms “Black” and “White” (as opposed to African American and Caucasian) to remain consistent with Thomas et al.'s original analysis.

² The lists included descriptors such as aggressive, creative, honest, optimistic. See Thomas et al. for complete list.

Leadership Traits and Perceptions

People vary in their conceptions of leadership. According to social-cognitive leadership theories, the traits associated with leadership are dependent upon the perceiver's perspective (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982). People, through their experiences, develop their own idea of the "prototypical leader," assigning certain traits to their ideal. Consequently, when making assessments of leadership potential and leader behavior they make trait *inferences* about the individual being evaluated (Lord et al., 1986). That is, they ascertain how the information they are provided matches the traits they ascribe to their prototype. Research shows that certain traits appear to be consistently associated with leadership perceptions (e.g., intelligence), while the correlation for other traits (e.g., warmth) may vary (Atwater & Yammarino, 1993; Lord et al., 1986).

Leadership perceptions and trait inferences are particularly relevant to the selection board process because, in most instances, members of the selection board have not had any personal interaction with those being evaluated. The selection board relies solely on the officer's record to determine promotions (Eisman, 1998; Wallace, 1991). Therefore, rather than basing assessments on personal observation, the selection board bases its promotion decisions on *perceived leadership potential* as portrayed in the individual's record (fitness reports, in particular) (Drewry, 1993; Gonzales, 1997; Wallace, 1991). This suggests trait inferences are likely to influence promotion decisions; increasing the value of certain descriptors while diminishing the value of others. Accordingly, the present analysis explored three questions:

- (1) Is there a relationship between traits listed in the written comments and the promotion recommendation?
- (2) Are the traits associated with the recommendation (if a relationship exists) ascribed more often to a particular racial group?
- (3) If so, what are the implications?

METHOD

Summary of Thomas et al. (1998)

Using the fitness reports from a matched sample of 582 Navy officers (i.e., 291 officers of each race, matched by rank and designator), Thomas et al. identified eight categories of descriptors from the written comments: general performance, personality traits, relations with others, self-expression, leadership and management, unique Navy behaviors, impact on command, and recommendations. The number of items in each category ranged from 3 (self-expression) to 24 (personality traits). Although no differences were found in the total number of descriptors

extracted from the fitness reports of black or white officers, the data revealed statistically significant racial differences among the individual items in each of the eight categories.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptors more often ascribed to black officers and those more often ascribed to white officers for the character-related categories personality traits and relations with others. The character-related categories reflect the perceived “inner” qualities of the officer -- a subjective assessment of who the officer “is” (Drewry, 1993: 153). The other categories are, for the most part, performance-related assessments and are excluded from this analysis. As noted by Thomas et al., their content analysis could not account for the actual performance of the officer. Consequently, any findings using the performance-related descriptors might be confounded by the unknown performance factor (See Arvey, 1998; Dipboye, 1985).

Data Analyses

Regression analysis was used to explore the possible relationship between the narrative descriptors and the evaluation recommendations. Regression would indicate whether certain descriptors explained any of the variation in the promotion recommendation included in the

Table 1
Descriptors More Often Ascribed to Black Officers and White Officers

| | Black Officers | White Officers |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Personality Traits | Motivated and dedicated Displays initiative Organized and sets priorities Aggressive Positive and optimistic | Energetic Intelligent Flexible Thorough Perceptive Honest Creative |
| Relations with Others | Team player Attentive to needs of others Gets along well with others Displays good counseling skills | Instructive Motivating Demanding |

fitness reports. The dependent variable, the recommendation for promotion, is marked as either “early,” “regular,” or “no” (coded 1-3, respectively). An early promotion recommendation is critical for advancement in the Navy’s “up and out” hierarchical promotion system. A regular promotion recommendation, on the other hand, can inhibit advancement possibilities. This results in extreme and inherent ratings inflation in Navy officer fitness reports (Kozlowski & Morrison, 1990; Thomas et al., 1998). Indeed, the mean of the promotion recommendations for the sample was 1.51 (on a scale of 1 - 3), with a standard deviation of .37. For the present study, the range restriction may limit the possibility of finding any statistically significant relationships. At the

same time, however, to the extent that statistical significance surfaces, an argument could be made for the meaningfulness of the effect given the limited variability.

The independent variables used in the regression were the 12 personality descriptors and the 7 relations descriptors in which Thomas et al. found statistically significant racial differences. They were coded as binary variables (1 - mentioned, 0 - not mentioned). The frequency percentages (i.e., percent mentioned) for the personality traits ranged from 14.1 to 63.7, with 44.0 as the median. The percentages for the relations descriptors ranged from 5.0 to 19.9, with 16.5 as the median.

RESULTS

Personality traits. Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis for the personality descriptors. The racial group ascribed each characteristic is indicated in the parentheses. As shown in the table, three traits -- creative, aggressive, and positive/optimistic -- were significantly related to the recommendation for promotion. Because of the binary coding, a negative *t*-value connotes a favorable relationship. That is, officers characterized as creative or aggressive -- ascribed to white or black officers, respectively -- were more likely to be recommended for early promotion. Conversely, officers characterized as positive/optimistic were less likely to be recommended for early promotion. As indicated, Thomas et al.'s findings showed the positive/optimistic descriptor was more often ascribed to black officers.

Relations with others. The analysis for the relations descriptors revealed four significant main effects (Table 3). Officers described as instructive or motivating were more likely to be recommended for early promotion, while officers described as "attentive to the needs of others" or "gets along well with others" were less likely to be recommended for early promotion. The former two descriptors were more often ascribed to white officers, whereas the latter two descriptors were more often ascribed to black officers.

Table 2
Results of the Regression for the Personality Descriptors

| Descriptor | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Intelligent (W) | .00 | .04 |
| Honest (W) | -.01 | -.45 |
| Creative (W) | -.10 | -2.73** |
| Energetic (W) | .00 | .05 |
| Aggressive (B) | -.02 | -1.98* |
| Positive and optimistic (B) | .12 | 2.77** |
| Thorough (W) | -.01 | -.59 |
| Organized and sets priorities (B) | -.00 | -1.48 |
| Flexible (W) | .00 | .36 |
| Motivated and dedicated (B) | .00 | .21 |
| Displays initiative (B) | .00 | -1.35 |

| | | |
|----------------|-----|-------|
| Perceptive (W) | .00 | -1.71 |
|----------------|-----|-------|

B = black W = white
 * $p < .05$
 ** $p < .01$

Summary

Table 4 summarizes the statistically significant relationships between the narrative descriptors and the promotion recommendation. Of the 19 descriptors, 4 were favorably related, 3 were less favorably related, and 12 were unrelated to the recommendation for promotion. Notably, none of the less favorable descriptors were more often ascribed to white officers, while only one of the favorable descriptors was more often ascribed to black officers.

Table 3
Results of the Regression for the Relations Descriptors

| Descriptors | <i>b</i> | <i>t</i> |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Team player (B) | -.00 | -.64 |
| Attentive to the needs of others (B) | .12 | 3.05** |
| Instructive (W) | -.01 | -1.20* |
| Motivating (W) | -.11 | -2.69** |
| Gets along well with others (B) | .13 | 2.37* |
| Displays good counseling skills (B) | -.00 | -.29 |
| Demanding (W) | -.01 | -1.24 |

B = black W = white
 * $p < .05$
 ** $p < .01$

Table 4
Summary of the Descriptors Related to the Promotion Recommendation

| Favorable | Less Favorable |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Creative (W) | Positive and Optimistic (B) |
| Aggressive (B) | Attentive to the needs of others (B) |
| Instructive (W) | Gets along well with others (B) |
| Motivating (W) | |

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Thomas et al. (1998) found statistically significant racial differences in the written comments of Navy officer fitness reports. In spite of the significant differences, they cautiously noted that their results could not be construed as clear evidence of racial bias (p. 141). The present study was undertaken to determine if evidence of bias could be demonstrated from the data collected by Thomas and her colleagues. The results suggest the possibility of bias. More specifically, the findings reveal potential racial biases, whether intended or not, in the descriptors as a function of leadership conceptions.

This extended analysis first examined whether there was a relationship between officers' described character and promotion recommendation. Since the basis of the recommendation was perceived leadership potential, the underlying assumption was that a favorable relationship between the descriptor and the recommendation indicated a match with the Navy's conception of leadership. A less favorable relationship indicated the descriptor did not fit the prototypical leader, while no relationship indicated the descriptor was unrelated to leadership perceptions. The study found creativity, aggressiveness, instructiveness, and the ability to motivate were likely to be associated with an early promotion recommendation and, thus, more highly valued in terms of leadership potential. Surprisingly, less valued were interpersonal skills and a positive outlook. Such characterizations were more likely to be associated with a "regular" or "no" promotion recommendation. Thus, irrespective of racial group, certain words used to describe officers were significantly related to the recommendation for promotion in their fitness reports -- favorably or less favorably.

The next question, then, was whether the descriptors were more often ascribed to one group or another. The analysis showed that with the exception of aggressiveness, all of the favorable descriptors were more often ascribed to white officers, whereas all of the less favorable descriptors were more often ascribed to black officers. The inference from this finding is that subtle, if unintended, racial bias may appear in the written comments of Navy officer fitness reports.

The first implication from these findings is that despite the current focus on teambuilding and the development of other interpersonal skills, these qualities are not yet valued by Navy supervisors (i.e., those who write the evaluations) with regard to leadership potential. Indeed, the results seem to indicate that the evaluators perceive these characteristics as antithetical to the prototypical leader. This perception is perhaps a function of the traditional military leadership paradigm which values authoritative presence over "softer" ideals. As a consequence, descriptors relating to interpersonal behavior can be career-inhibiting rather than career-enhancing.

The second implication from this study is that military supervisors may unintentionally create institutional disadvantage for some officers, while creating institutional advantage for others, by consistently associating certain descriptors with a particular group of people. The findings from the study suggest that black officers are more likely to be disadvantaged by career-inhibiting descriptors, while white officers are more likely to be advantaged by career-enhancing

descriptors. Although the differing descriptors may not reflect negative stereotypes, they may reflect cultural assumptions (Ruscher, 1998). In light of continuing differences in promotion rates for minority and nonminority Navy personnel (Baldwin, 1997), and the increasing importance of narratives for promotions boards due to ratings inflation, this suggests written comments in fitness reports may be one source of the disparities.

Racial and gender differences in performance evaluations have long been a concern for both military and civilian organizations (see Arvey & Murphy, 1998 for a review). Because evaluations play such a significant role in career advancement, any subgroup differences in performance ratings may negatively impact equal opportunity by inhibiting promotional opportunities for certain groups. The challenge, then, is to find ways to eliminate the potential biases revealed in this research. The author concurs with Thomas et al., who suggested that training supervisors to appropriately evaluate subordinates is of critical importance. In this particular instance, the training should impress upon the supervisors that the perceived content of an officer's character can influence his/her future career. Society as a whole attaches certain values to words in our vernacular -- some are perceived in a more favorable light than others. Awareness of these subtleties is important for maintaining an equal opportunity environment for all members.

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